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My Memories of the Shoah

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It seems that the Shoah becomes more alive with the aging of its victims. After the years of struggling to survive the aftermath- the uprooting, the building of a life from the shattered pieces-comes the insight into one's vulnerability. In my case the major devastation occurred during my early childhood. The insight into the damage developed progressively during those years of maturity in which there still is joy of life, when I have still not given up. Writing down my memories of that shattered, annihilated childhood may not add substantial historical revelations. Sometime I have the impression that everything had been said already, that the world may be tired of rehashing. I feel however that I should contribute to the recounting of the unthinkable horror as long as I still have the energy of my love for life, as long as I am still active and productive.

I wish I could remember the time when my family led a "normal" life. I wish I could recall Jewish holiday celebrations, Friday evening family dinners, Seder or Purim celebrations, grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins with "Freilichkeit" (joy) or even "Yidishkeit" (jewishness). Many victims of the Holocaust had such memories to hold on to that helped them going through the worst. This was however not my case: I have no happy memories of my early childhood, nothing strong or warm or good to hold on to.

My parents were both intellectuals born in a place that had lost its identity. The former Austro-Hungarian empire in which they were born nourished their upbringing with language, culture, humor and habits that changed completely during their childhood and early adulthood. After WWI another language and culture (or lack thereof) was imposed on them by the Rumanian occupation. Antisemitic discrimination prevailed in most aspects of their life. My father's studies of medicine and training in surgery took place in the Austria and Germany of the early thirties, the climate of which had been extensively analyzed by scholars of the Holocaust. My mother had studied French and German literature and history in a strongly anti-Semitic Rumanian university in Czernowitz. The "Gemuetlichkeit" of the "good old days" was gone when they came of age. The traditional Jewish homeliness did not exist when I became conscious of the world. That

was shortly before the Russian occupation of my native town, Czernowitz, former Austrian, the Rumanian, then Russian, then Rumanian again, then Russian again, now Ukrainian. My earliest memory was that of a party for my third birthday, during the Russian occupation, with a visit to the circus and a "Jause" (afternoon snack) to which many children were invited. We ate "Buttersemmerl"-buttered rolls and drank chocolate. For many years afterwards, I was reliving this day as the happiest thing that had ever happened to me. I was trying, for years, to revive the taste of that food. What followed were fear and a deep unhappiness, filling my life with darkness. Things I did not understand happened all the time making the people I loved, my parents and grandparents especially, permanently agitated and nervous, with no patience for me, until they disappeared from my life one by one, except for my mother. She was there and tried to comfort me, but I remember her almost always in tears herself. The historical background was first the Russian occupation that started with an intimidating process of indoctrination and harassment of the "bourgeoisie" to which we were supposed to belong, by the Soviet authorities, followed by deportation to Siberia of many people, mostly Jewish, including my favorite aunt Berta who died shortly afterward. The German occupation followed a year later, during which the Rumanian army was left to deal with "their Jews" at leisure. First hostages were taken, my father among them, along with other prominent members of the Jewish community. He just disappeared one day and for an eternity as it seemed to me, we had no idea if he was alive, since many of the hostages had been executed. Then my mother's parents, the grandparents whom I remembered hugging and kissing me all the time—they smelled good and were always neatly dressed—disappeared from my life. They were deported to Murafa in Transnistria in 1941. Along with the other Jews from their town. Campulung, Bukowina, they were ordered to leave their homes and forced to march in the harsh Ukrainian early winter to be "resettled". My mother's grandfather, a handsome gentleman of about eighty, a former Austrian officer was given an injection by a cousin, a doctor, to be put to (permanent) rest on the snowy road during that march. The deported were "resettled" in some miserable huts with no food and no heating, full of lice that brought epidemics. My grandmother died of typhoid shortly after their arrival, as did many others, and my grandfather died of a heart attack later. They were in their early fifties and their graves were never known. But these

are not my memories, this was told afterward. My memory of that time is that of indescribable fear and pain that emanated from my mother who was just sick with worry about her absent parents and husband. We were living in our house in Czernowitz with no running water, no heat, no electricity and very little food. Getting food was the main preoccupation. My mother was exchanging china sets, silverware, tablecloths for potatoes, flour, rarely lean chicken or eggs. I was always hungry, ready to munch (a habit I have not lost). What was my life during that time? Jews were allowed to leave the home only between 10am and 1pm. ~~And~~ had to wear permanently a large visible yellow star. During these three hours there were occasional visits with my friends Desi and Lushu, children of my parents' friends. We were all only children because the last thing a couple needed in the threatening years before and the horror years during the war, was a child. It was bad enough to have one child (us) and we perceived ourselves as a burden and a nuisance even at that young age. So these were the rare highlights of my 3-4year life: an occasional half-hour to play with pebbles or snow in the winter. Most of the time I was alone with some very unhappy and angry adults, the neighbors sharing the same backyard, confined as we were by the curfew. I had no toys, there was no storytelling, never music (my mother had spent a whole day standing in line to turn in the radio, otherwise there was death punishment). The piano was mute like a ghost in the living room. I pretended that my pillow was a doll and talked to it, dressed and put it to sleep. Winters were even worse: the pipes frozen, no toilet flushing no working faucets, washing almost impossible. The only heat came from a stove for which there was not enough wood; therefore I hardly took off my cloths ever, even at night. Once in a while, during the permitted hours, my mother took me to a public bath, which was very crowded, and we had to hurry because of the curfew. I still keep the memory of a delicious feeling in my little body being clean and warm after the bath, but this did not last. We had to get into a bad-smelling crowded tram to get home before the curfew. One day came the order for the entire Jewish population to leave the homes and concentrate in the ghetto, a confined area of a few streets surrounded by fences with barbed wire, This area was already overpopulated and with tens of thousands of more people one ended up living in a room with some other 30-40 people, literally one on top of the other. This problem however was taken care of: people were deported every day to concentration

camps, so there were fewer left in the ghetto. I remember walking to the ghetto with my mother our former cook Rosa who despite the food shortage had managed to stay rather on the plump side, and with Ferdl. His real name was Herbert Fuerth, a Viennese refugee who stayed with us. He had arrived one night, fleeing from the concentration camp in Dachau, where he had been sent from Vienna. This is how he had found out that he was half-Jewish (his father was Jewish but had never told him that before). He found our name in an old telephone directory, knew the name from Vienna and showed up hungry and in rags asking for a night's sleep. He stayed with us for four years, almost to the end of the war. Herbert, whom I called Ferdl for some reason, taught me Viennese-accented German, actually later taught me to read and write, German with gothic characters. I remember him wearing newspapers under his ragged brown coat and in his torn shoes when he arrived. He carried books which he explained were of chemistry and Italian. He often sang "Santa Lucia" and evoked a beautiful town named Naples. One day soldiers came to get Ferdl to be deported. I cried bitterly all day and in the late evening a knock in the door: Ferdl was back to our great joy. It turned out that at the train station when pushed to board the train, his knapsack got torn and from it fell hundreds of pages with chemistry formulas. The German officer in charge with the transport said: "You idiot, go home" and they all laughed at the idea that instead of carrying food and warm cloths someone could think of studying chemistry. So getting back to our march to the ghetto, I remember being quite happy there because I could roam the streets with other kids, with little interference from the adults who were preoccupied by the threat of impending deportation. There was a lot of food since all reserves had to be consumed before the deportation. I still keep the memory from the ghetto of lovely smells of freshly baked pastry, broiled chicken and geese. Cooking went on all day because the deportation could come at any moment and no food should be left behind... One day my friend Lushu and his parents disappeared. I saw him again after the war and years in the camp. His father had been shot in the camp, he came back with a paralyzed leg from poliomyelitis which was amputated later.

For us a miracle happened one day in the ghetto: my father showed up after a long detention in prison, as a hostage. I remember the scene of him and my mother waltzing on the street in the ghetto when they met. I also remember him telling us that in prison he

was not given food for a few days, and had to exchange his watch for an apple. I imagined the two round objects turning and changing places. A decree to let some "useful citizens" (doctors, engineers) return to their homes permitted us to leave the ghetto soon afterward. I do remember the return to our home: the house was emptied, curtains, rugs, most of the furniture had been stolen in our absence. But we managed to get some wood and warm a stove. I felt warm and cozy that evening because I had both of my parents and they kept hugging and kissing me and calling me sweet endearing names. This coziness did not last too long. My father was again taken away, this time to a concentration camp in southern Rumania named Targu Jiu, for the crime of having visited his in-laws before their deportation (Jews were not supposed to travel and he had been caught riding a patients' motorcycle). Terrible news came from the deported loved ones. I overheard a talk between neighbors saying that my grandmother had died in Transnistria, but my mother does not know. I was four or five years old then and became aware of a terrible responsibility: to protect my mother from finding out that her mother had died. I kept this secret to the end of the war. It was a heavy and terrible weight to bear. One beautiful sunny October day I felt that I cannot stay home any more. I ran out on the street and was overrun by a German military truck. The driver took me to the children's hospital, which was just across the street, but I was refused admittance because of the yellow star on my coat. Jewish children were not entitled to be treated, not even as emergencies. He then took me to the Jewish hospital, quite far, while I was bleeding heavily. I had a broken leg, a broken arm and was operated for internal abdominal hemorrhage. When my mother found out about this new catastrophe, she got very sick, with jaundice and we both shared a room in the Jewish hospital for about two months. I came home with casts of the arm and leg and was bedridden for another six months. Immobilized in bed, I matured in a strange and accelerated way: I started understanding what was going on, the war, the persecution, and the danger. I finally understood the word "list". That had always sounded so threatening. LIST meant the names of people to be deported to camps, and were posted daily in the street. People whose names were on the list had to present themselves at the railway station with their belongings, to leave for unknown destinations. I remember the paralyzing fear watching from the window, the slowly moving convoys of people dressed very warmly on hot summer days, with push

Carts. Sometime in the summer of 1943 my father again miraculously returned from the camp. One day he was seeing patients in his office, and when I entered the waiting room I saw him and two other men facing the wall with their hands up. Rumanian officers with rifles searched them. Soon afterward we were on the list. It was a long summer day my cousin Didi and my uncle Fritz, his father had come to help us pack and accompany us to the train to be deported. I somehow remember that day in detail; I was enjoying to play outside with Didi, but had that terrible fear of the unknown in me. Toward evening we all moved toward the station, with a horse cart carrying the luggage. At the station there were big crowds, German and Rumanian military urging the Jews to board the train. Another miracle happened: one officer, a former patient of my father showed up all of a sudden, told us to step down from the train and brought us to a hiding place in somebody's basement where we hid for some time (days? weeks? I don't remember). I only remember that I was terribly hungry and had headaches. I also remember a book with words arranged alphabetically, probably a dictionary. This is how I started to read. It must have been the end of 1943 when we returned home again. The Russian front came nearer and the Rumanian were scared. Restrictions for Jews eased up somehow. I could now play with other kids and one afternoon I had the revelation of another life. We had snuck into a movie theater and I saw on the screen a beautiful blond actress in a beautiful town, Prague, the golden city... That day I knew that things are going to happen that will change our miserable life. The Russians came close to the city in the spring of 1944. On March 25 my parents decided to leave their 3 houses in Czernowitz and everything within in order to escape a new Russian occupation. We boarded a train with just one suitcase, the last train for the next 50 years to Bucharest, the Rumanian capital. Jews were of course not allowed to travel. The train was full with the retreating Rumanian military. We entered a toilet, locked the door and spent the next 3 days in it, my parents, myself and the suitcase. We had left by night and arrived by night in Bucharest. What an incredible change! It was almost the golden city from the movie. I saw for the first time city lights, cafés, and restaurants with music. People were laughing! Joking! We had little reason to laugh or joke however. We had no papers, were illegal and not allowed even to rent a place to stay. We were also very poor, among the relatively affluent local Jewish population. Life for Jews in Bucharest was not that bad; because of the widespread

corruption of the Rumanian authorities there were few deportations, there were Jewish schools and even a Jewish theater! My father found some former patients, former inmates at the TarguJiu camp who helped him work illegally as a locum tenens doctor. During the spring and summer of 1944 the Allies bombed the city heavily and those who could, fled to the countryside including many doctors with their families. I was sent to "safety" with such a family and was deeply unhappy to be away from my parents, with a status of poor refugee on charity. I was happy to return to the city under the bombing, where we spent many hours daily in the shelter. I made friends there and learned roller-skating! My need for affection and friendship with peers was a driving force; I had come out of the darkness of my seclusion in Czernowitz with an enormous appetite and curiosity for life and people. I was very flattered to have gained the attention of a much older boy, Lushek, in the bomb shelter. He was 12 then, and taught me the game "battleship" which we were playing during those long hours, sinking each other's ships on paper drawings. It was feared that the Germans, obviously losing the war and having to retreat, will destroy the city and probably kill the Jews before their withdrawal. Zionist movements organized transportations to the Black Sea and from there by boat, to Palestine. The boats were Greek and Turkish, most in very bad shape. Lushek was sent along with hundreds of other teenagers in that summer of 44, to Palestine. His boat named "Bulbul" sunk somewhere in the Dardanelles and no one survived.

In August 1944 the Russians entered ("freed") Bucharest. After 3 days and nights in the bomb shelter, during which the Germans bombed and destroyed a large part of the city we got out on the street covered with rubble and broken glass to what was for us the end of the German occupation and the beginning of life, as I perceived it very intensely. Now everything was possible, we don't have to hide any more as Jews, the world will open up to us.

War was not over yet. The horror of the Holocaust continued for another 10 months. We did not know yet the extent of the devastation. I was, by age, still a small child, had never been to school or led what is considered a normal life, but I had survived and felt that I will live and know also joy. Others had suffered more, much more, had perished or were destroyed staying alive. I had just been bereft of my childhood. Mine was a life without a childhood; perhaps this is why, vicariously, the child in me was and still is alive.

The years following the war were very tough. Communism in Eastern Europe was a harsh climate to grow up in. Anti-Semitism took different aspects, such as discrimination in school, university, and job selection. My Zionist friends including my first boyfriend were arrested and kept in jail for years, tortured and put in solitary confinement. The worst was the fact that we were not allowed to leave. I had been harassed and almost expelled from medical school for wearing the Star of David as a necklace. How ironical, the Nazis forced us to and the communists punished us for asserting our Jewish ness! Years later, in the early sixties, the communist government, in need of foreign cash, decided to "sell" some of their Jews, and this is how I found my way to freedom, in my early adulthood. Yes, I did survive and now, decades later, I can bear testimony.

